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**Post-colonial careering and urban policy mobility: between Britain and Nigeria, 1945-1990**

**Keywords: post-colonial careering, biography, New Towns, urban policy mobility, Britain, Nigeria**

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**Abstract:**

This paper sets out the value of the concept of ‘careering’ to understanding the global mobility of urban policy across historical and contemporary contexts. Through a case study of one colonial and post-colonial career in urban development, we demonstrate the material and ideological connections between late colonial development in Nigeria, British reconstruction, and international consultancy. Empirically, the paper provides novel post-colonial perspectives on Britain’s post-World War II reconstruction spanning the mid-to-late-twentieth century, globalizing the geographies of the British New Town. Conceptually, the paper argues that careering provides a valuable tool for progressing the study of urban expertise and its mobility in four ways. First, it provides a tool for connecting geographically distant urban development projects. Second, careering allows us to explore intersections between urban development policies and geopolitical transformations. Third, careering allows us to see the impact of ideas, skills, experiences, affiliations and contacts formed at different stages of a career on later professional practice, slowing down and lengthening out our understandings of the processes through which urban policy is made mobile. Fourth, careering as a method demonstrates the continued value of biographical approaches to urban policy mobility, highlighting in particular professional lives worked with colleagues and contacts rather than in isolation, and foregrounding the everyday embodied nature of urban expertise. The article concludes by suggesting such approaches could be productive for the writing of new post-colonial histories of geography and its allied disciplines.

**1. Introduction**

This paper sets out the value of ‘careering’ (Lambert and Lester 2006; Hodge 2010) to understanding the global mobility of urban policy. Focusing on careers that spanned empire and decolonisation, and in particular the work of Richard Phelps in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria and Britain, we demonstrate how individual professional lives connect the spaces of late colonial development, British New Towns and international urban consultancy. In doing so, we provide novel post-colonial perspectives on Britain’s post-World War II reconstruction, globalizing the geographies of this urban transformation. This is generally presented as a national story; but here we move beyond this framing and show that the making of Britain’s new urban spaces in the period after 1945 can only be understood as part of a broader set of ideas, people and practices that were formed transnationally, and in relation to empire (and its endings). The paper focuses on the period 1945-1990, which

reflects the career trajectory of a cohort of urban experts whose professional lives began in empire and continued into the recent past.

By developing the concept of careering in relation to urban geographies, this paper makes two important contributions. The first is conceptual and methodological: careering contributes to a burgeoning field of historical research which aims to augment often ‘presentist’ accounts of urban policy mobility whilst also offering methodological tools for research that reaches into the present (Clarke 2010; 2012; Harris and Moore 2013; Healey 2013; Jacobs and Lees 2013, MacFarlane 2011). Insights provided by historical geographers, and historians of architecture, planning and science concerned with colonialism, expertise, and imperial and post-colonial careers provide additional tools for understanding urban transformation (Hodge 2010; Home 2013b; Kothari 2006a; 2006b; Lambert and Lester 2006). In particular, by developing the concept of careering in this context, we show how this provides the opportunity to explore the development of policy and practice between geographically distant places, across changing geopolitical landscapes, and through extended periods of time.

Second, the lens of post-colonial careering provides substantive insight into urban policy by reconfiguring understandings of the development of British urban space in the post-war period. In doing so, it sets a new agenda for research into the relationships between different kinds of urban expertise (e.g. administration, planning, architecture and community development), policy mobility, empire and decolonisation. Decolonisation resulted in the mobility of thousands of professionals, as colonial positions disappeared or were reconfigured. Many returned to Europe, whilst others continued to work abroad in new post-colonial contexts. This paper is the first substantial exploration of the professional lives of those who returned to Britain. It demonstrates that constellations of people, ideas and practices involved in urban policy between 1945 and 1990 were significantly shaped through the unique set of mobilities brought about by the end of European empires. This influenced how knowledge and expertise was shaped as professional careers brought individuals into connection with new ideas, sites, and contacts.

The paper begins with an explanation of the conceptual and methodological approach, which draws on post-colonial research in geography, history, and planning, together with recent work on urban policy mobility. Here we introduce the concept of careering and its value for

scholars exploring urban policy. Following this, we describe the methodological value and challenges of pursuing a ‘careering’ approach. The paper then outlines the scale and scope of professional mobility in decolonisation and in particular the experiences of colonial servants returning to Britain following the end of the British Empire. Focusing on the career path of a group of former colonial administrators into urban management, the paper examines the professional life of one such example: Richard Phelps. Phelps was a colonial administrator who forged a new career in urban management in Britain following Nigeria’s independence in 1960. We examine his roles in Nigeria and Britain, and the international consultancy with which he was involved following decolonisation. Discussing the career of Phelps within a wider network of urban administrators with colonial experience, the paper explores the expertise that colonial administrators were seen to possess, the reasons they were drawn to urban management in Britain, and the mechanisms through which they operated as international consultants. It also demonstrates how this group understood the progress of modern development and narrated their own professional biographies over time. We conclude by highlighting how the theoretical and methodological tools of careering can contribute not only to understandings of urban policy mobility, but also to histories of geography and its allied disciplines.

## **2. Globalising urban expertise**

Drawing on work emerging from planning history, this paper contributes to the understanding of the complex multidirectional flows through which urban expertise was produced and applied in the mid-to-late-twentieth century. Imperial powers continued to have a strong influence on late colonial and post-colonial states, including their towns and cities (Hysler-Rubin 2011; Home 2013a). However, in the context of decolonisation and the Cold War, urban expertise also came via the socialist bloc (Stanek 2012), from other ‘Third World’ countries, and from international organisations such as UNESCO (d’Auria 2016). Moreover, different urban planning trajectories were not unconnected, nor always aggressively adversarial, as Cook *et al.*’s (2014) work on British Planners’ tours to Soviet New Towns attests. Urban policy in this period was therefore a product of the transnational and multidirectional mobility of people, ideas and influence (De Raedt 2013; Friedman 2012; Ward 2010). Though planners had been involved in international projects in earlier eras (e.g. Patrick Geddes’ work in India and Palestine, Hysler-Rubin 2011), in this period there existed for the first time a sizeable global community of urban experts, drawing their ideas and policies from their experiences across the world (Lagae and De Raedt, 2013). This

community embraced not only architects and planners, but also engineers, administrators, anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists with interests in urban questions (Fredenucci 2003; Naylor 2013). These disciplinary knowledges were also profoundly shaped by the colonial contexts in which they emerged (Bailkin 2012; Shephard 2011; Steinmetz 2013). Despite the growing interest in this international field of urban policy and practice in the middle years of the twentieth century, there has been strikingly little interest in the ways in which ‘metropolitan’ spaces have been shaped through these transnational connections (though see Bailkin 2012; Fredenucci 2003; Naylor 2013).

Although the reconstruction of urban Britain following the damage of World War II was ‘presented as a national project immanent in national space’ (Matless 1998, 201), as Conekin *et al.* (1999, 18) contend, the ‘British experience of modernity... [was] part of a much wider international formation’, including imperial and postcolonial relationships (see also Short *et al.* 2003). British reconstruction should therefore be understood as part of a ‘global postcolonial moment’ in planning (Friedman 2012, 555) which itself was one aspect of a global project of development and modernization (Cullather 2006; Engerman and Unger 2009). This was produced through the overlapping occurrences of the end of empire, the rise of the expert planner, the globalization of the professions of planning, design and urban management, and the mobility of experts as the trajectories of individual careers were shaped through decolonisation. These careers lasted into the 1990s, connecting these later decades with decolonisation, and contributing to recent calls to explore empire and its legacies beyond the 1960s (Drayton 2016).

### **3. Career and urban policy mobility**

Although sharing overlapping concerns, recent research on urban policy mobility (e.g. McCann 2011; Peck and Theodore 2010; 2012) has rarely engaged with these transnational histories of architecture and planning (Jacobs and Lees 2013). Indeed, as several scholars have argued (Harris and Moore 2013; Jacobs and Lees 2013; McFarlane, 2011), urban policy mobilities research has often concentrated on the present, obfuscating important connections with past practice, or suggesting that such transnational policy mobility is novel. Building upon the contention that a ‘genealogical or critical historical sensibility’ can provide important contextualization of contemporary processes, as well as posing new questions of them (Huxley 2013, 1527), here we outline the value of career as a conceptual and methodological tool for understanding urban policy mobility past and present.

Lambert and Lester (2006) introduced the idea of ‘careering’ in their account of colonial lives as people worked, and moved, across the British empire. They argue that imperial careers ‘constituted meaningful connections across the empire... and these connections were one kind among many which facilitated the continual reformulation of imperial discourses, practices and culture’ (Lambert and Lester 2006, 2). Studying imperial careers allowed Lambert and Lester to follow not only people, but also their ideas and subjectivities, as they developed on the move between colonial locations. We argue here that careering as an approach that focuses on the professional roles of particular mobile individuals within the construction of a broader set of ideas and policies is a useful tool for studies beyond imperial contexts. It can contribute methodologically and conceptually to research into urban policy mobility.

Careering first works to bring into view the relations between different places in the development of policy ideas and work practices, and can therefore account for ongoing connections between policy ideas, disciplinary knowledges and everyday practices formed in relation between multiple sites (Lambert and Lester 2006). Careering can also connect development in places often conceptualised separately – like Europe and the post-colonial world – and in doing so expand the range of spaces in which we understand urban expertise to be made (McFarlane 2011). If, as urban policy mobility scholarship has shown, ‘it is simply no longer possible to view the world through lenses that implicitly or explicitly locate the politics of public policy within national bounded systems’ (Cochrane and Ward 2012, 5), then careering provides one way of thinking across and beyond national boundaries to understand the construction of urban space.

Second, we argue that careering offers a means of understanding the connections between policy and wider political and socio-economic contexts, particularly when careers bisect periods of transformation, such as decolonisation or the end of the Cold War. In different ways, Barnes’ (2001) pioneering biographical work discussing the development of geography as a quantitative science during the Cold War, and Larner and Laurie’s (2010) study of engineers in the water and telecoms industries during privatization, are suggestive of the value of such an approach. Both explore the interweaving of professional lives, personal agency and broader contexts, focusing on ‘embodied actors who knowingly create careers for themselves through and against broader political-economic processes’ (Larner and Laurie

2010, 219). Both also demonstrate that careers are shaped by, but also *influence* wider political or economic shifts.

In the context of decolonisation, Hodge (2010, 24), adapting Lambert and Lester's phrase, has provided similar insights through his account of the 'post-colonial careering' of colonial development experts whose careers form an 'important thread of continuity across the seemingly fundamental rupture of decolonization and independence' (see also Home 2013b). Kothari's interviews with colonial administrators who became expatriate development professionals highlight the ways in which ideas and practices were translated into different political worlds: not only did individuals remain involved in development, but 'colonial forms of rule and governance' and the 'performance of expertise and authority' endured, as did ways of imagining colonial space (Kothari 2006a, 118; 2006b). Although this work has focused on development and planning in the global South, these approaches provide equal value for those exploring other sites of development. Indeed, ideas and careers formed through colonialism were central to the urban reconstruction of post-war Britain, as well as to the development of newly independent states.

Third, careering forces us into research that covers a longer duration. Most work on contemporary urban policy mobility focuses on following fast-moving policies as they travel (Peck and Theodore 2012, for a critique see Wood 2015; 2016). This speed is a crucial feature of the contemporary policy world, but it is not the only one. Moreover, as McFarlane (2011, 117) has argued, 'there is no pre-given relationship between the nature and speed of policy movement and its resultant effects.' Wood (2015, 568-9), drawing on research into the adoption of rapid transit in South Africa has demonstrated the need to 'consider the process of policy circulation as constant, gradual, creeping, at times sluggish and sticky, and at other times loitering instead of prompt and hurried.' As a consequence, Wood (*ibid.*) argues for chronological accounts of the learning process, focusing on the lengthy discussions of particular policies in particular places. Careering provides an alternative approach through which to examine the impact of historic encounters and longstanding connections on urban policy, with the focus on expertise and ideas embodied in (sets of) individuals over extended periods, rather than on the repeated discussions over policy in one place. Now, just as in the past, urban experts pursue careers over decades, and even if ideas can move and transmute quickly, the 'transfer agents' that are central to these movements retain and draw upon longer professional experience. Those professional lives encompass not just travel to conferences



and consultations, but also physical migrations, between or within countries, as a result of individual career development or broader political and economic transformations.

Fourth, and finally, the paper demonstrates that careering offers methodological opportunities for the study of policy mobility. Thinking about urban policy past and present as a global process (albeit one constituted through local places) has consequences for research, forcing urban scholars to move away from national or city level case studies of policy interventions (see Cochrane and Ward 2012). Researchers have been working with the extended case (McCann 2011), following policies as they move (McCann and Ward 2012) and deploying ethnographic approaches (Roy 2012; McCann 2011; see Wood 2016 for a summary of methodological approaches). Careering provides an alternative approach, building on research in policy studies and planning history that has highlighted the value of biography (Healey, 2010; Home 2013b; Jacobs and Lees 2013; Lagae and De Raedt 2013; Ward 2010). Whilst scholars have recently provided an important corrective to heroic stories of superstar consultants by demonstrating the role of local agency in decision-making processes (Wood 2014), we argue that value remains in focusing on individual lives. A careering approach does not require a focus on high profile individuals; indeed, it is well placed to highlight the contributions of ‘middling technocrats’ as crucial enactors of policy (Roy 2012, 38; see also Larner and Laurie 2010 on engineers, and Lagae and De Raedt 2013 on committee members and brokers in architecture and planning). As importantly, a focus on careers can shift the emphasis from the individual in isolation, instead focusing attention on whole cohorts of professionals, as illustrated by Larner and Laurie’s (2010) research into water and telecommunications engineers. Careers are not pursued alone, but rather alongside colleagues and collaborators. Such an understanding of careering also helps to highlight the everyday embodied and social nature of policy-making as it endures through ‘chats over coffee or lunch, drinks in the bar... through friendship and conflict...’ (McFarlane 2011, 145-7; Wood 2016).

#### **4. Careering methods**

In this paper, we focus on the career of Richard Phelps, as part of a broader cohort of colonial administrators who went on to take up key roles in New Town management in Britain. Phelps became a particular focus amongst his cohort because of the volume of materials he left behind through which it is possible to reconstruct his career. Though Phelps was a substantial figure in the New Towns movement, our wish is not to exhume a forgotten hero for the

geographical or planning canon. Rather, we use Phelps as an example to sketch out one professional life amongst many that followed a similar trajectory. In doing so, we use a careering approach to set Phelps in the context of a broader set of careers and movements through which urban expertise was formed and moved across the colonial and post-colonial world.

Many of the papers relating to Phelps' work at Skelmersdale and Central Lancashire New Towns are available in Lancashire Archives, selected and deposited by Phelps himself.<sup>1</sup> Fewer details are available of Phelps' colonial work, though these too, emerge in his interviews and speeches. These archival collections include what Wood (2016, 399) has called 'personal learning materials' – newspaper clippings, speeches and presentations, years of reports and recommendations – that Phelps also donated. They provide insight, through correspondence with other New Town managers, as well as contacts abroad, into some of the networks, and 'perpetual and perennial habits', through which urban expertise was produced over a lifetime (Wood 2016, 403). Phelps' records are supplemented by broader details about colonial administration, the resettlement of colonial servants following decolonisation, and new town development and management drawn from the UK National Archives and by contemporary newspaper accounts – details that situate Phelps as part of a larger cohort of colonial administrators embarking on second careers.

Much of the available material presents a public record of professional lives and is therefore both partial and subjective. Larner and Laurie (2010, 220) reflect on the challenges of using such 'public biographies' in research, noting that they 'involve seamless post-facto rationalisations in which ambivalence, multiple motivations, dilemmas and failures are concealed.' Despite this, these materials provide a unique insight into the way that Phelps presented his career and narrated its development. Indeed, he was particularly interested in reflecting publically on his career and was regularly engaged as a public speaker, to both local interest groups (Women's Guild's, Rotary Clubs) and professional bodies (Town and Country Planning Association, and Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors).<sup>2</sup> He also undertook interviews with local and national press, produced articles, reports and book chapters, mainly about his experiences and thoughts on new town management (Phelps 1976), and was interviewed about his urban management roles in Britain for a 1990s archive and oral history project about New Towns: the *New Towns Record*.<sup>3</sup> The paper draws considerably on these materials, and in particular on a series of speeches given in the early

years of Phelps' role as New Town Manager in the late 1960s. Whilst speeches and lectures are a particular form of discourse, shaped for specific audiences, and written to entertain as well as to inform, they were a key part of Phelps' professional persona (and duty) as New Town Manager. They therefore provide a good insight into how Phelps aimed to represent his role at the time (rather than in retrospect, as recorded in the later oral history interview).

That Phelps archived speeches and discussions about his career in Britain, spanning four decades, provides crucial evidence of the changing ways in which colonial expertise was figured in his public biography. As Kothari (2006a) has shown in the context of development careers, analysing autobiographical narratives provides insight into how individuals understood and portrayed their working lives, including how their roles changed along with geopolitical shifts, and how they made sense of these changes at various points in their careers.

## **5. Post-colonial careering**

The period in the aftermath of World War II was marked by significant international mobility. During this time 1.5 million people came to Britain from the 'New Commonwealth'. At the same time, in addition to those returning from military service overseas, at least 25,000 colonial administrators and their families returned to the UK (Kirk-Greene 2001). These returnees have often been absent in research into post-war migration which has overwhelmingly focused on migration of former colonial subjects to Europe (Bailkin 2012). When they have appeared, scholarship has considered their personal experience of return, rather than their professional lives back in Europe (Buettner 2001; 2010; Harper 2005; Smith 2003). The 'second careers' of these returnees, as well as the professional contributions of many post-war immigrants in the field of urban policy and beyond, have often been ignored, despite the fact that many took high-level jobs on their return (Kirk-Greene 2001).

Setting out in a second career after colonial service was not always easy. In a UK context, return often meant a drop in salary, standard of living, and a loss of status (Buettner 2001; 2010). The problem of finding employment for these returnees prompted the establishment in 1957 of the Overseas Services Resettlement Bureau (OSRB). By the efforts of the OSRB and the returnees themselves, many found employment within local government, the domestic civil service, the developing institutions of the welfare state such as in hospital and university

management, and in the development and administration of urban reconstruction, housing and new towns (Kirk-Greene 2001, 150). About 25% of those registered with the OSRB between 1957 and 1965 took on such ‘government or quasi government’ jobs (no author 1965). The Bureau was keen to publicise this, ‘reporting on balance, a remarkable success in persuading employers of the capabilities and potentialities of their clients’, and highlighting in particular several high profile new roles: ‘among recent successes have been the appointments of three ex-officers in the Colonies as general managers of New Towns in Britain’ (no author 1965).

Ten of the twenty-eight British New Towns – a key part of the UK’s post-war urban development and reconstruction policy – were managed by ex-colonial administrators (see Table 1). Whilst Major Generals and Brigadiers were particularly notable in their presence as managers of the first phase of new town building, between 1946-1951 – overseeing Basildon, Hemel Hempstead, Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, and Stevenage in England, and East Kilbride, Glenrothes and Cumbernauld in Scotland – the Overseas Civil Service provided the ‘largest single source of General Managers’ for the second generation of new towns designated between 1961 and 1970, something Phelps himself noted when reflecting on the role in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Following careers across this period shows how urban expertise intersects with broader geopolitical transformations, not only through the changing ideological and economic climate, but also through the mobilities and transformations wrought in career trajectories as a consequence.

**Table 1.** New Town General Managers with a background in colonial administration. Source: *Who Was Who*; *Obituaries*; *New Towns Record*; *Various websites*

Name	New Town Management	Colonial Administration
Sir Ambrose Flux Dundas, K.C.I.E., C.S.I.	General Manager Bracknell 1949-1952	Indian Civil Service
John Vincent d'Alessio Rowley, B.A.	General Manager Bracknell 1955-1973	Sudan Political Service
Gerald.J. Bryan, C.M.G, C.V.O, O.B.E, M.C.	General Manager Londonderry 1969-1973 General Manager Bracknell 1973-1982	Swaziland, Mauritius, British Virgin Islands, St Lucia
Richard Sedgwick McDougall, C.B.E	General Manager Stevenage 1957-1967	Colonial Secretary's Advisory Committee on Local Government, including projects in Sierra Leone, Nyasaland, Fiji, Kenya
W.S. Holley, A.D.K. (Hon)	General Manager Washington	Sabah

	1964-1980	
Dennis Kirby, M.V.O, M.B.E	General Manager East Kilbride 1963-1967 General Manager Irvine 1967-1972	Sierra Leone
Anthony Grier, C.M.G, M.A	General Manager Redditch 1964-1976	Sierra Leone, India, Sabah
Richard W. Phelps, C.B.E	General Manager Skelmersdale 1967-1971 General Manager Central Lancashire 1971-1986	Nigeria
Roland C. Peagram, O.B.E	Deputy General Manager Central Lancashire 1971-1985	Uganda
Garry Philipson, B.A., D.F.C	General Manager Aycliffe and Peterlee 1974-1985	Far East

### *Richard Phelps in Nigeria*

Richard Phelps was born in 1925 and studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at the University of Oxford, before serving in the 14<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment in the Second World War between 1944-1946. He took up a post as District Officer in the Colonial Administrative Service in the Western and Northern Regions of Nigeria in 1948 (when he was 23) serving in Ilorin, Yola and Numan, coming back to the UK in 1957 to serve in the Treasury briefly, before returning to Nigeria for another stint, this time as a Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Federal Government between 1959 and 1961, during which time Nigeria became independent (no author, 1959).<sup>5</sup>

In Nigeria, Phelps worked first as a District Officer. This was a role of great variety: ‘organizing a national census, designing a fertilizer or adult education campaign...and setting up a ministerial system’ (Kirk-Greene 1999, 517). In the Northern Region of Nigeria where Phelps was first posted, district officers mainly worked alongside and through local emirs in a system of indirect rule which allowed the British to govern ‘through indigenous rulers and institutions’ (Falola 1999, 70). Criticised from the 1930s by educated Nigerian elites, this system of indirect rule, which sought to limit the impact of modernization on ‘traditional life’, continued to hold sway amongst many colonial administrators well into the 1940s (Home 1983). Nevertheless, after 1945, District Officers were increasingly expected to be ‘modern administrators’, working ‘alongside educated Africans to prepare Britain's colonies for self-government’ (Jeppeson 2016, 1).

Urban areas across much of Nigeria were managed by ‘townships’: municipal authorities also lead by colonial administrators, usually district officers (Home 1983). Phelps worked in the districts of Ilorin, Yola and Numan from 1948 for nine years. Ilorin in particular was a centre for ‘progressive’ Nigerian involvement in urban politics. Here, Phelps and the colonial administration worked alongside a (purely advisory) town council made up of Nigerian elites to manage municipal development. Nigerians involved in such urban administration often used these positions to press for ‘more influence and better services, such as electricity and water’ (Home 1983, 168). Despite pressure from London to replace native authorities with democratically elected local councils following World War II, colonial administrators could (and sometimes did) resist such pressures for both democratisation and urban improvement, ‘frustrat[ing] attempts by Nigerians to improve municipal government in their towns’ (ibid.).

Phelps was working in a period in which the focus of British colonial policy became development: industrial, agricultural, rural and urban. Following the 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act, unprecedented resources (and ‘technical experts’) flowed into Nigeria and other African colonies (Low and Lonsdale 1976). From 1946, urban development took place within the framework of the Nigerian Town and Country Planning Ordinance which aimed ‘to make provision for the re-planning, improvement and development of different parts of Nigeria,’ and was based largely on British planning legislation from the 1930s (cited in Home 1983, 171). It allowed land to be acquired by the government for development, and for the preparation of large-scale development plans (Fatusin 2015).

Although the ‘political’ role of colonial administration was increasingly separated from ‘technical’ roles after World War II, District Officers continued to be important. They were increasingly involved in managing large-scale development projects, coordinating the work of the education, public works, medical, veterinary, and agricultural departments (Bradley 1955). Thus despite constitutional changes from 1945 which brought about more local representation, colonial administrators continued to have significant influence in the 1940s and 1950s as the state moved towards independence. Post-war District Officers were therefore ‘creating or building all the time’ (Bradley 1955, 14). In his role as Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Federal Government when he returned to Nigeria between 1959-61, Phelps oversaw these development projects at a higher level. In colonial Nigeria, then, Phelps’ roles involved executive power, experience of development planning, and the coordination and management of technical experts.

### *Phelps and New Towns*

Phelps was 36 when decolonisation cut short his colonial service career. When he returned to Britain permanently in 1961, he first worked as a Principal in the Treasury (international economic relations, and financing of local government and new towns), followed by a period as Senior Administrator for Hampshire County Council where he had ‘special responsibility for town development’.<sup>6</sup> Through his return and subsequent employment, Phelps, alongside many of his contemporaries (see Table 1), was able to repackage his overseas expertise and become a type of ‘urban expert’ administrator. This new career direction led to the most long standing role of his working life: first, as General Manager for Skelmersdale Development Corporation (1967-1971), then as General Manager/Chief Executive of Central Lancashire Development Corporation (1971-1986). The role of General Manager of a New Town Development Corporation was a position of significant executive power, coordinating new urban development. New Town Development Corporations themselves drew in part on the governance structures of development and improvement boards found throughout the colonial empire (e.g. the Lagos Executive Development Board in Nigeria, formed in 1928) (Home, 1986). In this section we explore how Phelps, and others like him, were qualified for, and drawn to, roles in urban reconstruction. We also demonstrate how understandings of development were constructed across colonial and British contexts.

### *Expertise and interests*

It is clear that in the 1960s and 1970s, at least in the view of those appointing New Town General Managers, colonial experience could be relevant to British urban development. Although colonial administrators returning to the UK were sometimes cast as backward in their attitudes, and out of step with the progressive socialist politics of modern Britain (Buettner 2001; 2010), individuals like Phelps were appointed to powerful positions. Why did they seem like good appointments? And what drew Phelps, and others like him, to the New Towns?

Although we do not have access to the archival records of Phelps’ recruitment, another who made this shift from colonial administrator to New Town Manager, Gerald Bryan, noted that his own appointment was based on perceptions of his ability to ‘obtain the respect of all’ and the fact that he was ‘an administrator of a high order’ (Bryan 2008, 193-4). Bryan also noted that appointments were supported by references from influential people encountered in

colonial service - including in his case a former colonial governor – highlighting the continued importance of colonial networks in post-colonial careers (ibid., 193). Reflecting on the value of his work in the Colonial Service in Nigeria for his later career in urban development in Britain, Phelps suggested it provided ‘a first class background’. He made these comments in a speech in 1967, not long after taking up the role of General Manager of Skelmersdale.<sup>7</sup> He elaborated that ‘working on one’s own in lonely places, putting up with the crudeness and chaos of a state approaching independence’ was useful experience for a prospective New Town Manager who would encounter similar conditions (in their early development, new towns were often basic, with amenities such as shops and pubs not yet built, and administrators working from temporary and sometimes inadequate office accommodation).<sup>8</sup> It is predominantly in speeches like this that we hear about Phelps’ colonial work. These comments elucidate the parallels drawn by Phelps himself between different roles and the learning brought to later assignments from earlier experience. They also demonstrate how Phelps represented colonial space (lonely, crude, chaotic) in his public speeches.

The experience of colonial administration in a period where decolonisation was an active prospect provided Phelps, he believed, with the right experience for working in a development corporation: ‘My Nigerian experience accustomed me to working in ‘limited life’ situations... My previous working experience was abroad in our overseas territories and I was accustomed, I think, to realising that one succeeded if one did oneself out of a job’.<sup>9</sup> The fixed life-span of work for Development Corporations (which existed only until the new towns were planned and substantially built) was therefore familiar. Though many joining the colonial service in the late 1940s foresaw a much lengthier process of decolonisation, they may have also been aware that they would eventually need to find alternative careers. Moreover, colonial careers involved significant mobility, both within and between colonies (see Table 1) such that they could be seen as long-term placements akin to both New Town management roles and other forms of development consultancy. In colonies soon to be independent, as in Development Corporations, the role of administrators was to deliver modern development. In both cases, administrators were required to create fully formed communities that could function independently, building from (what was perceived to be) ‘scratch’.



Whilst Phelps was never explicit about his reasons for joining the New Town Development Corporations, the recollections of another of his cohort shed light on how such an opportunity might have been viewed:

I had a growing feeling that I had reached my peak...and that with my career in the Colonial service over, it would be downhill all the way ... It was in this frame of mind that I heard about a vacancy [New Town General Manager] that would ... provide the sort of challenge I needed. (Bryan 2008, 189)

Looking back on his career in retrospect, Phelps provided some insight into the appeal of the New Town roles for him:

All those of us who worked in the new towns, and may have moved on to other things, will never have, as managers, the same scope for innovation over such a wide range of functions as we had in the Development Corporations.<sup>10</sup>

On the one hand Phelps captured a sense of what it was that made New Towns an exciting prospect for various professions to work on – from the returnee colonial administrator searching for a job befitting of his experience, to architects who appreciated the chance to execute projects on unprecedented scales. The role of New Town Manager afforded ex-colonial administrators the opportunity to maintain the executive power and status they enjoyed overseas.

### *Discourses of development*

As well as similarities in the Nigerian and British roles, archives provide evidence for the ways in which Phelps understood the development projects he was involved with. The New Towns, and British reconstruction more broadly, were wrapped in political and social discourse relating to progress, planning, research and modernization (Matless 1998). These discourses are striking in their similarity to those surrounding late colonial development policies which emphasise experimentation and the application of modern scientific techniques in the construction of both the built environment and new societies and economies (Hodge 2010; Livsey 2014; Scott 1998). As well as sharing a desire to utilise the newest methods and materials, colonial development policies and British reconstruction plans aimed to both reflect the changing desires of the population, and to construct citizens who would

play an active part in a modern nation. Phelps' speeches reflected these narratives: 'Society is changing too fast, and technological changes are taking place too quickly for any of us to be able to afford the luxury of not being enlightened by the widest and most general research and most forward thinking'.<sup>11</sup>

However, Phelps' correspondence and speeches also reveal ambivalence over what modern development could actually deliver. In 1967, Phelps described his experience in Nigeria as working amongst 'peoples whose outlook, to be charitable, was mediaeval'.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that his colonial role was to produce an independent country of modern citizens, he described his Nigerian colleagues as backward. In this he reflected common discourses present in colonial development where, despite the best efforts of colonial powers to bring about development through modern housing, planning and infrastructure, colonial subjects were criticised for remaining stubbornly un-modern in their outlook and lifestyles (d'Auria 2016). Physical development projects could not always bring about 'social development'.

In 1967, the year in which he made these comments about Nigerians, Phelps took up his position as General Manager of Skelmersdale New Town, designed to house overspill population from expansion and inner city slum clearance in Liverpool and North Merseyside. His discussion of the social pathologies of the Irish Catholic population (who were Skelmersdale's main target population) suggested that this community could be seen as similarly problematic. Speaking publically in 1969, Phelps noted that the Irish in Liverpool were:

[N]ot ideal pioneering material. They represent a social challenge... the social problems of building a New Town these days is better conceived as one of teaching people to swim who don't like water anyway, rather than turning keen potential swimmers into excellent ones...<sup>13</sup>

On another occasion he reflected on the 'twin complexities which sadly too often result from Irish and Catholic backgrounds (damn the dissolution of the monasteries and the potato famine)'.<sup>14</sup> These issues, he noted, meant that Skelmersdale was 'going to contain a lot of families who are problems'.<sup>15</sup> Speaking in 1969 Phelps gave a frank reflection on the likely successes of the new towns as social development projects: 'Far from the New Town representing the brave new world of better living for the most virile section of the

community, it is in fact in many cases in our situation just another port for the people coming into it'.<sup>16</sup> New Towns were to be used as civilizing forces to elevate and improve problem communities or those in need. The civilizing mission of colonial development was also relevant in Britain where poor and immigrant communities required modernization. But just as in colonial contexts, this would not always be successful in the eyes of those involved with the process.

These ways of understanding poor and immigrant communities in Britain were common in this period and our argument here is not that Phelps was unique in holding such views because of his previous colonial career. Nevertheless, there are striking similarities in how Phelps described these communities in both Britain and Nigeria in speeches he gave reflecting on his management roles and the challenges he faced. These similarities highlight the intellectual connections Phelps himself drew through his career: the challenges he saw and the solutions he prescribed. That Phelps held such views about Nigerian and Irish populations – and discussed these views publically – suggests that these were not problematic or unusual in 1960s Britain. In fact, Phelps' experience in Nigeria was seen, certainly by those employing him, as advantageous for his subsequent roles as General Manager at Skelmersdale and later Central Lancashire New Towns. More broadly, these similar understandings of 'problem' communities across British and colonial contexts is suggestive of how not only the possibilities, but also the failures of development as modernization were being discussed globally. The project of development was a global one, and similar hopes and aspirations, but also concerns, surrounded policies and practice across different sites in Britain, the (post)colonial world, and beyond.

Phelps' earlier colonial work can be understood as crucial to his later work as an urban development manager in Britain, providing him with the experience, expertise and contacts through which to forge this second career. Phelps remained a member of the Royal Empire Society (a London club renamed the Royal Commonwealth Society from 1958) throughout his career, continuing to associate socially and professionally with those who had worked in empire or continued to work overseas (no author 2011, 427). Phelps was a regular visitor to the club, even getting post delivered there.<sup>17</sup> Informal spaces such as these contributed to the construction of elite cosmopolitan identities (Craggs 2014) and were key sites in which careers were forged and urban development policy shaped, through everyday practices of sociability. Moreover early professional life shaped later work, outlook and identity as

affiliations remained even as career paths developed in new directions. Longstanding networks of class and connection were still important in appointments to the colonial service in the 1940s (Jeppeson 2016) and remained influential in Phelps' subsequent roles. Indeed autobiographies of other colonial administrators who became New Town Managers highlight how friendships formed in empire continued to matter, personally and professionally, throughout a lifetime (Bryan, 2008). In the next section we explore how such connections enabled Phelps, and others like him, to further develop their careers in urban consultancy overseas.

### *Phelps as International Urban Development Expert*

When Phelps was appointed general manager of Central Lancashire New Town in 1971, his biography not only described his colonial experience, but also stated that he had 'travelled extensively visiting New Towns and modern urban development in all Scandinavian countries, France and the USSR'.<sup>18</sup> This underlines what we have already seen: that travel and knowledge of other places was part of his professional persona. An international outlook and experience was central to his claim to expertise, and a key part of how he narrated his career. In the 1970s and 1980s, Phelps further developed his overseas experience as an urban development consultant.

Overseas consultancy in the area of urban development was something that the UK government in the 1970s was particularly keen to promote as part of an attempt to reposition Britain as a global leader (no author 1976). Against a backdrop of decolonisation and declining economic power, this was an attempt to compete in what Ortolano (2011, 501) has called the 'global economy of ideas about future cities' that was emerging. A 1976 article in *Built Environment Quarterly* notes: 'The development plans of the oil-rich countries have generated increasing demand in one particular area – that of urban development – where the UK has special experience and expertise derived from its New Town development programme' (no author 1976, 125). This 'nationalist urbanism' was based on not only practical experience but also on national imaginaries of Britain and its expertise (Ortolano 2011, 501; Larner and Laurie 2010).

From the early 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Phelps carried out consultancy work in Egypt, the Falklands Islands, Hong Kong, the Lebanon, Nigeria, Russia, Vanuatu and Venezuela (no author 2011, 427).<sup>19</sup> That Phelps was asked to give a keynote address at the

first International New Towns Association Congress in Tehran in December 1977 is indicative of his professional esteem and the influence he held.<sup>20</sup> Phelps' work abroad was not unusual; he followed a common trajectory for those who had worked on the New Towns. Tracing the minutes and correspondence of work that Phelps was involved in from the mid-1970s reveals how he, alongside other ex-colonial administrators-cum-general managers were integral in the establishment of British urban overseas consultancy. In developing this new career path, Phelps drew on his colonial connections and worked in partnership with other ex-colonial administrators carrying out work for the British Urban Development Services Unit (BUDSU) and establishing the New Towns Consortium, both competing for overseas consultancy contracts (see Phelps *et al.* 1977).<sup>21</sup>

A focus on careers illustrates how old colonial contacts provided opportunities for new projects and collaborations but could also be politically challenging. In December 1975 Phelps received a letter from a contact dating back to his Nigeria days. The content prompted him to write a personal letter to a contact in the UK Department of Environment seeking advice about whether he should provide urban management advice to Nigeria: '[The] letter came out of the blue from an old and close friend...We were in Nigeria together. Afterwards he joined the C.B.I [Confederation of British Industry]...and is now on the main board of Dunlops'.<sup>22</sup> Phelps' expertise in the area of international town planning had been mentioned by the Dunlops contact to Allison Ayida 'one of the most influential Civil Servants in Nigeria'.<sup>23</sup> Phelps wrote to Ayida in Nigeria noting that the UK Government was 'interested in developing the export of services in the urban development field,' signing off the letter by noting 'Nigeria is now far enough away in time, as it were, for one to be detached but my interest is undiminished'.<sup>24</sup> Though further correspondence reveals Phelps' uncertainty in being involved in such consultancy work, and of returning to Nigeria – 'I myself have always been very sensitive to the danger of any suggestion that one may be trying to make a comeback in an area with which one had been familiar' – he was to work in Nigeria again in 1981.<sup>25</sup>

This new engagement with Nigeria, twenty years after Phelps left colonial service there, was in the form of consultancy work for the Crown Agents. The Crown Agents began life as a specifically colonial agency, adapting through decolonisation into a statutory company delivering development projects in predominantly Commonwealth countries (and overseen by this point by the Minister of Overseas Development) (Sunderland, 2007). Phelps was

therefore engaged by an organisation whose own history and ongoing practices were indicative of the complex and ongoing entanglements of British colonial institutions in former colonies (Power, 2009). Phelps' report for the Crown Agents concerned the management structures that would oversee Nigeria's new capital, Abuja. He recommended a structure that closely mirrored that of British New Town Development Corporations. The report also suggested that:

[W]e should assume that all key management roles will be filled by expatriates... [but that] we should recognise national aspirations by commenting that we have prepared the plan on the basis of expatriate staff because we assume the necessary resources are not available in Nigeria, but that the company would accept the responsibility of training Nigerians as suitable candidates became available.<sup>26</sup>

These assumptions regarding the expertise and leadership available in Nigeria echo many of those articulated in the process of formal decolonisation twenty years previously.

By the 1990s, when Phelps was asked to describe his role in colonial Nigeria, he articulated this earlier phase of his career in terms of international consultancy: it involved 'dealing with the development planning of a large country in consultation with various international agencies'.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to remarks from the 1960s when the focus was on the trying conditions of late colonial Nigeria, by the 1990s this experience had been rearticulated (and decolonised) in Phelps' narratives. The focus became development planning and coordination, in an international, rather than colonial context. Phelps rewrote his career narrative periodically with his colonial experience a diminishing feature of his CVs over time, as this became less valuable or even problematic.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting on this changing public biography tells us, very directly, about the differing ways in which it was possible to repack previous expertise in the development of a career over decades, following the requirements of geopolitical, economic, and professional development.

Despite this rebranding of colonial experience, Phelps' return to Nigeria illustrates the continuing value of this early career to his later work trajectory. He was initially drawn in through a British contact made in colonial Nigeria, who felt Phelps would be appropriate not only because he was an urban expert, but also because he knew Nigeria. Here the longstanding nature of learning, contacts and expertise are rendered explicit, underlining the

value of seeing policy mobility as a slow, messy and iterative process (Wood 2015). It also demonstrates the fact that careers are not conducted in isolation, but as part of a broader network. These broader connections matter. Though formal decolonisation cut short the careers of colonial administrators such as Phelps, others in the informal empire of business were able to continue and it is through such a contact that Phelps was connected with the Nigerian authorities. He was formally engaged through what was a colonial agency, and exported a model of British urban development which itself had colonial (Nigerian) roots in the colonial era Lagos Executive Development Board (Home 1983). Lingering traces of colonial governance and assumptions about expertise remained, but were repackaged as urban development consultancy. Whilst a focus on the international movement of urban policy could understand Phelps' work in Nigeria as the export of British expertise, a careering approach demonstrates that it was a multi-directional process.

## **6. Conclusions**

This paper develops Lambert and Lester's (2005) account of careering through a focus on post-colonial professional lives in Britain and abroad. It demonstrates that a careering approach provides several important insights into the mobility of urban policy. First, it provides a valuable tool for connecting geographically distant urban development projects. Following Phelps' career, as one of a cohort of professionals beginning their working lives in empire but developing them across the post-colonial world, north and south, illustrates the need to view colonial development, British reconstruction and international urban consultancy as part of one story. Second, careering allows us to explore intersections between urban development policies and geopolitical transformations. Phelps' career was shaped through decolonisation and the post-colonial policies of the British state and its former colonies. His ideas, expertise and opportunities were shaped through – and in turn influenced – these broader geopolitical transformations. Third, careering allows us to see the impact of ideas, skills, experiences, affiliations and contacts formed at different stages of a career on later professional practice. This forms an important corrective to presentist work in urban policy mobility that often fails to explore earlier genealogies of contemporary urban consultancy, and commonly focuses on fast-moving policy transfers. For Phelps, a careering approach means acknowledging the variety of ways in which colonial expertise and experience continued to be relevant as he moved through distinct stages of his career. The example of Phelps provides clear evidence of the need to bring together scholarship on urban development practice in the early and mid-twentieth centuries and that which focuses on

contemporary policy mobility: his professional life materially connects these different research realms. Fourth, careering as a method demonstrates the continued value of biographical approaches to urban policy mobility. As the example of Phelps shows, careering is well placed to explore the role of middling technocrats as well as superstar consultants, and to understand professional lives as lives worked not in isolation, but as part of a broader cohort of professionals. Moreover, careering brings to light the material ways in which global urban policy was made through everyday embodied encounters: a conference lecture, lunch at the club, a letter from an old friend, a reference from a former colleague. Careers are messy and contingent but also actively crafted on a daily basis by individuals.

The article has provided an original account of the impact of post-colonial expertise in Britain, globalizing the geographies of Britain's post-war reconstruction with reference to colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. Though the focus here is on one particular form of professional expertise – urban administration – the example presented highlights the value of careering as a tool with which to explore urban expertise in a wide range of contexts. Phelps was one urban expert amongst many operating in post-war Britain and internationally. Starting his career as a generalist administrator he became part of a larger jigsaw of urban expertise including policy-makers, architects, planners, surveyors, community/social development officers, consultants and academics. Exploring the colonial and post-colonial careering of this wider group of professionals involved with urban planning, policy and management offers the opportunity to develop important new insights into the shaping of urban expertise in the post-war period, not only in Britain, but across decolonizing Europe, where colonial experts returned to the continent (Fredenucci 2003), and the globe, as a new cohort of international experts were produced.

More specifically, post-colonial careering offers opportunities to write new disciplinary histories. Although geography's colonial past – as servant of empire and as science of exploration – has been well documented (e.g. Driver 1992; 2000; Godlewska and Smith 1994), there have been few attempts to explore how geography engaged with decolonisation as a process and was in turn shaped through the material and ideological consequences of the end of empire (though see Bowd and Clayton 2013; Butlin 2009; Jons 2016; Power and Sidaway 2004). Decolonisation had a profound effect on the disciplines of planning, sociology, architecture, and geography as it fundamentally reshaped the fields in which individual experts (both within academic and policy arenas) could work, and in which



broader disciplinary knowledges could be deployed (Bailkin 2012). Following careers through decolonisation provides one productive new direction for researchers exploring the history of geography and its allied disciplines in the academy and professional practice in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Central Lancashire Development Corporation records, Lancashire Archives: series NTC. Hereafter all archival references refer to Lancashire Archives unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, General Manager's papers: Talks, publications and consultancies NTC33/3/1.

<sup>3</sup> *New Towns Record, 1946-2002* IDOX, London. This is an electronic compendium of plans, articles, surveys, interviews, books pictures and specially commissioned interviews and reports on development of the UK's 33 new town development corporations.

<sup>4</sup> Phelps on 'The General Managers' in the *New Towns Record*.

<sup>5</sup> Biographical notes on seven senior professional officers of the Central Lancashire Development Corporation NTC11/1/69.

<sup>6</sup> CV Richard Wintour Phelps, 1975 NTC33/2/9.

<sup>7</sup> Speech to St Helen's School of Management 1967 NTC33/3/1.

<sup>8</sup> Speech to St Helen's School of Management 1967 NTC33/3/1; Interview with Alex Horsfield, Chief Architect Bracknell New Town recorded in the *New Towns Record*.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Phelps recorded in the *New Towns Record*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Speech to Royal Institute of Public Administration 1969 NTC33/3/1.

<sup>12</sup> Speech to St Helen's School of Management 1967 NTC33/3/1.

<sup>13</sup> Speech to The National Council of Women 1969 NTC33/3/1.

<sup>14</sup> Speech to Garston Rotary Club Monday 1968 NTC33/3/1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to Richard Phelps from Clifford Culpin and Partners, Chartered Architects, 29<sup>th</sup> Oct 1975 "To be collected at Royal Commonwealth Society" NTC33/2/9.

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<sup>19</sup> British Urban Development Services Unit, personal correspondence between Phelps and Department of Environment about proposals for overseas assistance NTC33/2/9.

<sup>20</sup> International New Towns Association, correspondence about the Tehran Congress, Dec 1977 (NTSK4/1/64 – Skelmersdale Development Corporation records).

<sup>21</sup> British Urban Development Services Unit, personal correspondence between Phelps and Department of Environment about proposals for overseas assistance NTC33/2/9; New Towns Consortium (continuation of BUDSU) NTC33/1/10.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Richard Phelps to C.P. Scott Malden, Department of Environment, 15<sup>th</sup> Dec 1975 NTC33/2/9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Richard Phelps to Allison Ayida, Secretary to the Military Government, 15<sup>th</sup> Dec 1975 NTC33/2/9.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Richard Phelps to Andrew Derbyshire, Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall & Partners 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 1976 NTC33/2/9.



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<sup>26</sup> Letter from Phelps to Alan C. Froude, Crown Agents, 16<sup>th</sup> Oct 1981 NTC33/2/22.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Phelps recorded in the *New Towns Record*.

<sup>28</sup> Biographical notes on seven senior professional officers of the Central Lancashire Development Corporation NTC11/1/69; CV Richard Wintour Phelps, 1975 NTC33/2/9.